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ABSTRACT

This digest highlights one tool that teachers use--standardized tests--from the parent's viewpoint. The discussion covers basic features of testing and suggests questions that a parent might ask his or her child's teacher concerning such tests. Standardized tests are usually objective tests sold by commercial publishers and designed to provide a common measure of students' performance. Schools use standardized tests to evaluate individual students, school systems, and school programs in relation to their counterparts among the pool of other test takers. Standardized achievement and aptitude tests are defined and described, and their limitations are discussed briefly. Ways that parents can prepare their children for such tests are outlined, and how parents can discuss tests with teachers before and after the tests are administered is discussed. The addresses of four organizations that distribute additional information are provided. (TJH)

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Talking to Your Child's Teacher About Standardized Tests

by Carolyn Boccella Bagin

Teachers learn about students by using a variety of methods. They assess students by

- observing them in the classroom,
- evaluating their day-to-day classwork,
- grading their homework assignments,
- meeting with their parents,
- keeping close records of how they change or grow throughout the year, and
- administering tests.

Tests give teachers only part of the picture of your child's strengths and weaknesses. Teachers combine the results of many methods to learn about your child's skills, abilities, and knowledge.

This digest highlights one tool that teachers use -- standardized tests. It explains basic features of testing and suggests questions that you might ask your child's teacher. By understanding the role of testing, you can help your child succeed in school and can develop a better relationship among you, your child, and your child's school.

What Are Standardized Tests?

Standardized tests are objective tests that are usually created by commercial test publishers. You may be familiar with one of the popular tests, such as the California Achievement Test (the CAT), the Stanford Achievement Test (the SAT), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (the ITBS), or the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. There are many other standardized tests.

Standardized tests give a common measure of students' performance. Because large numbers of students throughout the country take the same test, they give educators a common yardstick or "standard" of measure. Educators use these standardized test to tell how well school programs are succeeding or to give them a picture of the skills and abilities of today's students.

Why Do Schools Use Standardized Tests?

Standardized tests can help teachers and administrators make decisions. They help schools to measure how students in a given class, school, or school system perform in relation to other students who take the same test. Using the results from these tests, teachers and administrators can evaluate the school system, a school program, or a particular student.

How Do Schools Use Standardized Tests?

Different types of standardized tests have different purposes. Standardized *achievement* tests measure how much students have already learned about a school subject. The results from these tests can help teachers develop programs that suit students' achievement levels in each subject area, such as reading, math, language skills, spelling, or science.

Standardized *aptitude* tests measure students' abilities to learn in school -- how well students are likely to do in future school work. They do not measure subjects taught in school, but rather they measure a broad range of abilities or skills that are considered important to succeed in school. The results from aptitude tests help teachers to plan instruction that is neither too hard nor too easy for students. These tests can measure verbal ability, mechanical ability, creativity, clerical ability, or abstract reasoning.

Remember that standardized tests have limitations. They are not the perfect measure of what individual students can or cannot do. Paper tests cannot measure everything that students learn. Also,

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your child's scores on a particular test can vary from day to day and many factors can affect a particular score -- whether your child guesses, receives clear directions, follows the directions carefully, is comfortable, and so forth.

How Can You Help Your Child?

Here are a few tips to remember.

- Don't be overly anxious about test scores, but encourage your child to take the test seriously.
- Don't judge your child on the basis of a test score.
- Talk to your child's teacher often to monitor your child's progress.
- Ask your child's teacher to suggest regular activities that you could do to help your child.
- Make sure your child does his or her homework.
- Make sure your child is well rested and eats a well-rounded diet.
- Have a variety of books and magazines at home to encourage your child's curiosity.

What Should You Ask Your Child's Teacher?

Before the test. . .

- Which tests will be administered during the school year and for what purposes?
- How will the teacher or the school use the results of the test?
- What other means of evaluation will the teacher or the school use to measure your child's performance?
- Should your child practice taking tests?

After the test. . .

- How do students in your child's school compare with students in other school systems?
- What do the test results mean about your child's skills and abilities?
- Are any changes anticipated in your child's educational program?

Where Can You Go for More Information?

This digest highlights some important points about testing; it doesn't tell you all there is to know about standardized tests and test results. For more detailed information about testing, you may want to contact these organizations:

American Federation of Teachers
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20011

ERIC Clearinghouse for Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation
American Institutes for Research
3333 K Street, NW
Washington, DC 20007

National Education Association
1201 16th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036

National Congress of Parents and Teachers
700 North Rush Street
Chicago, Illinois 60611

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